

MUSKRAT EXPRESS

WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS
NOVEMBER + DECEMBER 2015 NEWSLETTER



*We wish you a
Merry Christmas*



REMEMBER TO RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP



The newsletter for the:
Williams Lake Field Naturalists
1305A Borland Road, Williams Lake BC, V2G 5K5

Membership fees: Family (\$30), single (\$25) or student (\$10) memberships can be mailed to the above address. Please complete the membership and waiver forms available at the Nature Centre (250)398-8532, muskratexpress@shaw.ca or the web site below. For more information about the club please contact Fred McMechan at 392-7680 or e-mail Fred_McMechan@telus.net

Williams Lake Field Naturalists Website <http://www.williamslakefieldnaturalists.ca>

Scout Island Nature Centre Website <http://www.scoutislandnaturecentre.ca>

Executive of The Williams Lake Field Naturalists: president Fred McMechan, secretary Ordell Steen, treasurer Katharine VanSpall and directors Nola Daintith, Cathy Koot, Peter Opie, Ray Hornby, Brian Chapman, Don Lawrence and Christie Mayall



Editors: Thanks to all of you who have contributed to this edition of the newsletter. Please expect your next edition of the newsletter in mid-January. If you have comments, suggestions or articles for the next Muskrat Express please contact Margaret Waring (398-7724), Jim Sims (296-3638) or e-mail us at muskratexpress@shaw.ca. If you are receiving a paper copy of this newsletter



and email is available to you, please consider saving some editor time, money and paper by requesting a digital copy sent via email. If you need a paper copy to read comfortably it is possible to print the one or two pages you want to read. You can request a digital copy only by emailing the request to the muskrat.

It is Membership Time

Cathy Koot, Membership Coordinator

It's time to re new your membership with the Williams Lake Field Naturalists. January 1st of every year is the official renewal date. Membership fees remain at \$25/single, \$30/family, \$10 student. Please fill in and sign the attached membership form, which includes an informed consent and assumption of risk and mail it to the Scout Island Nature Centre address on the form, bring it to an upcoming WLFN event, or drop off at the Nature Centre when staffed, or at the UBC Alex Fraser Research Forest office (the log building above the Stampede Grounds at 72 S. 7th Ave., Williams Lake, Mon-Fri. 8 am – 4:30 pm).

If you have children or more adults beyond two per family, please also fill in and submit the, “Informed consent and assumption of risk agreement for children under 19 or additional adult family members”, available at <http://www.williamslakefieldnaturalists.ca/membership.html>.

If you've joined the WLFN part way through 2015, we'll gladly pro-rate your 2016 membership—if you'd like to continue your membership, it would be much appreciated if you join in on the calendar renewal period for ease of membership accounting. Please email cathykoot@telus.net to arrange a prorated renewal fee.

Thank you for your participation as a member with the Williams Lake Field Naturalists!

Williams Lake Christmas Bird Count

By Phil Ranson

The 48th Annual Williams Lake Christmas Bird count will be happening - come rain or shine, on Sunday, Dec 20th. Despite one of our best turn-outs last year, the birds just weren't there and we ended up with only a low to moderate count. Possibly the cold snap in early December moved the birds on and many of the winter finches which usually arrive to fill the void decided to go elsewhere. But it's a new year and the Redpolls seem to be returning in numbers

after a complete absence last year - sorry, we had one, and if El Nino kicks in as forecast who knows what can happen.

We always expect something unusual and sometimes we get something bizarre (I'll allow myself to feed off Marion Coreless and her Scarlet Tanager at Terra Ridge in 2012 for one more year), but no matter what happens, everybody enjoys themselves, we'll have another year's worth of valuable data and be a year closer to our Golden Jubilee in 2017 (I already have some bunting on order).

For those not familiar with the Christmas Bird Count, it is a collaboration between the Audubon Society, Bird Studies Canada and thousands of volunteers across North America. The standard size for the count is a 24 Km diameter which in our case is centered somewhere in Boitano Park and stretches from Bull Mountain to south of Sugarcane; and from the Meldrum Road just across the Fraser to some obscure point between the Airport and the Likely Road. We usually have around 15 parties to cover off as much of the accessible areas as possible in the daylight hours.

Backyard and feeder reports are also valuable and can be phoned in to Fred's 392-7680 after 6:00pm. Proceedings usually wrap up with a pot-luck supper and recap of the day's events at Fred McMechan's house at 6:00 P.M.

Despite our best efforts we don't always have adequate coverage so are always looking for new people to fill the gaps. You don't have to be an expert birder; a pair of eyes, ears and a few hours to spare is all that's required. If you would like to participate, please give Phil Ranson a call at 398-7110 or email ranson1@telus.net to get more details.



A few Northern Pygmy Owls are Usually Found During the Count

Photo by Sandy

Notes from the Executive



Fred McMechan

1) We have decided to provide an \$800 bursary to a graduating high school student with an interest in the biological sciences for this school year. We will contact the Williams Lake Scholarship Committee to give this information. Just a reminder to put articles aside for donation to our Yard and Plant in May, our main fund raiser for this bursary.

2) We submitted our own club letter to the Ministry of the Environment opposing the application by Atlantic Power to increase the amount of railway ties it wants to burn at their co-generation plant. The Cariboo Chilcotin Conservation Society also presented their own letter on this issue.

To read these letters and others you can access them at the Williams Lake Air Quality website, <http://breatheasywilliamslake.org/railway-ties/>

- 3) The Christmas Bird Count will be held on Sunday, December 20 and Phil Ranson has volunteered to be the coordinator. Details about this event can be found in this newsletter.
- 4) Last year for the Winter Carnival ice blocks were removed from the lake to be used for the igloo building event, but no protective fences were installed around the holes. This year we will be communicating with the Williams Lake Winter Carnival Committee to request that suitable protective fences be installed around the holes.

Winter at Scout Island Nature Centre

By Sue Hemphill



The ice is forming and the trails are covered with snow—perfect sledding and snow person making for the Sparks, Kirsten Hamm's kindergarten class and the Tales and Trails program lead by Joan Lozier. The grade 7 Outdoor Education class and the Home School group are still spotting herons, geese and mallards. The students get more excited by the muskrats and deer. You wouldn't believe the stashes of willows the beavers have made at their three lodges around Scout Island.

Ciel Patenaude and Paula Laita mentored a small group of 5-6 year olds during the fall break. These were children that teachers and counselors felt would especially benefit from a program that took them outdoors to explore, something they don't often get to do. Our participation in innovative programs like this one or mapping and developing an outdoor exploration guide for the Dairy Fields, supporting the Grade 7 Outdoor Academy, and helping to develop the nature kindergarten to start September 2016 help integrate the benefits of nature into more children's lives. Our school holiday and summer programs inspire children to appreciate nature, learn nature crafts, and be active outdoors year-round. These experiences nurture the love of the natural world that's so essential to developing environmental awareness and fostering cognitive development.



Kids have fun during the Fall Break Program

The fact that Scout Island Nature Centre was able to fund the school district's Outdoor Education Resource Teacher (Frances McCoubrey) is really exciting as she is initiating innovative ways to support teachers who want to take their students outdoors to learn. But Scout Island can only afford to provide this funding for this school year. We are working to find grants to keep this position supported into the future. We are hoping our Friends will continue to support all of our programs as well as donate so that the Outdoor Education teaching position can continue to get classes outdoors to learn.

Thank you to all who have helped so far this year. By donating to Scout Island Nature Centre, you will help us continue to offer these opportunities. Most important, our Friends ensure that Scout Island Nature Centre can continue to offer the *tonic of wilderness* to the whole community (people and wildlife)

You can donate by using the donation form at the end of the Muskrat or by going on line to www.scoutislandnaturecentre.ca where you can use pay pal or your credit card. Either way you will receive a charitable receipt. If you would like your donation to be a gift in a friend's name, we can send you a gift card to announce your gift.

Give the Gift of Nature This Holiday Season

Early Childhood Education at Scout Island

By Joan Lozier

Each Wednesday morning at 10:30, parents and toddlers, kids in backpacks and energetic preschoolers gather in front of the nature centre for Tales and Trails. We begin this loosely- structured program with songs, rhymes, finger plays and poems and stories before dawdling along the trails. Everyone is encouraged to go at their own pace, stopping to explore and investigate what interests them. We meet up again somewhere along the trail for more songs and stories and to talk about what we have seen, heard, tasted, smelled and touched. We enjoy throwing rocks on puddles to test how thick the ice is, sitting quietly listening for birds, drawing pictures in the sand with sticks, playing King of the Castle on the big rocks, following deer tracks and much more. When it gets colder, we will start the program with some active outdoor songs and games and a brisk walk before heading in to the basement room for our poems and stories.

Everyone is welcome to join us.



Air Quality in Williams Lake

As discussed in the last Muskrat, the last month has allowed people to comment on Atlantic Power Corporation's (Williams Lake's biomass-fueled electricity generation,) proposal to burn railway ties to extend the plant's energy purchase agreement with BC Hydro. Since then, many people have written comments in the paper as well as sent them to the Director of Environmental Protection. Many of these comments are on the website <http://breatheasywilliamslake.org/railway-ties/>

We want to say thank-you to Tammy Keetch for her work as Air Quality Educator since 2012. She is handing the reins over to Beth Holden. Beth will carry on with Tammy's work to help raise awareness about air quality and to encourage people to be part of the active transport movement in the city. If you have any questions for Beth, you can reach her at bethholden@live.com. You can also post questions about air quality on the website using the above link.

Common Raven (*Corvus Corax*)

Researched by Jim Sims

When I arrived back home after my morning walk with Smedley I was welcomed by the unmistakable loud croaking of the neighbourhood Trickster who was making a flyby. As though it knew I was planning to write a story about him he paused on his way looking down at us, and soared around in a broad circle before continuing on his way. Maybe he was thinking about a trick for me. Many First Nations stories involve the Common Raven and he has earned the name Trickster as these stories often have him tricking coyote, whale as well as us. A google search might help you find many of these tails of *setsé7*, how he stole fire from the sun for example. For centuries this rather intelligent avian has followed us around as he has learned that we often leave behind some scraps as an easy to find food source, just check out our transfer station.

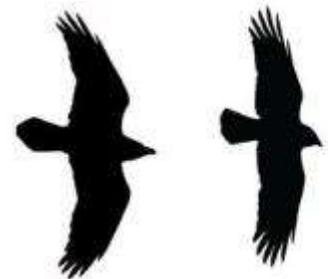


The checklist of Cariboo Chilcotin Birds lists the Common Raven as a year round fairly common species (6 to 20 individuals per locality per day) that nests within the region. I have watched from the top of a mountain as the Raven climbs on the thermals high above me and I have looked down on him in our deepest river valleys as he rests in a tall Fir snag. Ravens generally nest early and use a variety of nesting locations including cliff faces in the river valleys and larger trees in the grasslands. I have a pair that nests here at Rose Lake each year. They make use of a tall old Pine snag in a mature stand of mixed pine, spruce and aspen at the back of my property. I know as soon as they are beginning as the neighbourhood is filled with their constant calling (yelling) as they vocally defend the territory. I often observe them carrying large sticks to add to the nest late in the winter and use it as a sign that it is getting warmer.

Can you tell which one of these to the right is a Raven, a question we often ask and one we should be able to answer during the Christmas Bird Count? The Raven



has the longer wedge shaped tail while the crow's tail is shorter and rounded. The Raven's wing shape is more slender and pointed with 4 narrow finger feathers while the crow has 5 broader fingers (don't count the thumb). When perched



look for the massive bill and the scruffy throat shown here. Crows are often observed in large cawing flocks whereas the Raven is more likley to be travelling singly or in pairs unless there is a good food source nearby.

The Raven is a strong graceful flyer interspersing the flight with soaring, long glides and slow wing flaps. They are noted for their

complex acrobatic displays of rolls and summersaults, often done in pairs. Young playful Ravens have been observed carrying sticks high into the air, dropping them and then diving to grab them before they hit the ground. They are capable of mimicking the calls of other birds so their calls can be quite varied. Ravens can threaten the success of other nesting birds. One Raven will distract a breeding adult away from the nest while a second comes in to steal away a hatchling or an egg. When I am watching the Terns at Eagle Lake I am careful to look around for Raven before I get too close. The Common Raven is the largest Passerine and is the only Passerine game bird in British Columbia. In the Cariboo it can be hunted on private property only with a bag limit of five. It is interesting to note that the First Nations People had more respect for *setsé7*, and their stories prevented the killing of Trickster.

Our View of the Night Sky – December 2015.

Comet Catalina

Comet Catalina was discovered in October 2013. It is thought to be a first-time visitor arriving from the distant Oort Cloud & as such has no track record of performance. The comet is expected to remain at a fairly constant magnitude of 4.8 to 5 through December & into January. Look for it in the dawn sky rising from the horizon. On December 7th the comet should be close to Venus (just to the left). On Jan. 1 the comet should be very close to the star Arcturus in the constellation Bootes. A bright Moon will put a temporary damper on the comet's rise to fame from November 24th through December 3rd. - See more at: <http://www.skyandtelescope.com/observing/comet-catalina-sails-into-northern-skies111120151111/#sthash.vPCZv4Wk.dpuf>

Planet Review

Mercury is visible low in the south western evening sky mid to late December.

Mars is visible as a reddish 'star' in the dawn sky in the east in the constellation Virgo. On Dec. 23 to 25 Mars is a few degrees above the star Spica in Virgo.

Jupiter is visible in the dawn sky in Leo.

Venus continues to dominate the eastern fall morning sky. On December 7, at approximately 7:53 a.m., Venus will be occulted by the crescent moon.

Saturn is not visible.

Moon

Full moon - Nov. 25th & Dec. 25th. New moon - Dec. 11th.

Meteor Showers

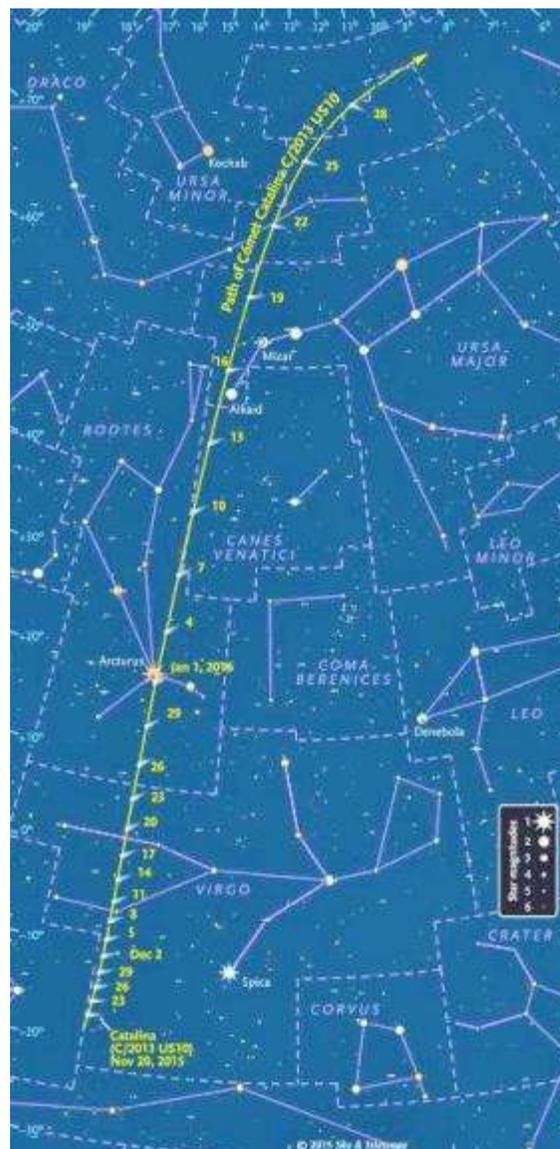
The Geminid meteor shower peaks on Sun. & Mon., Dec. 13/14th. Meteor spotting should be good from early evening on into the night of the 13th. The Ursid meteor shower peaks on Wed., Dec. 23rd.

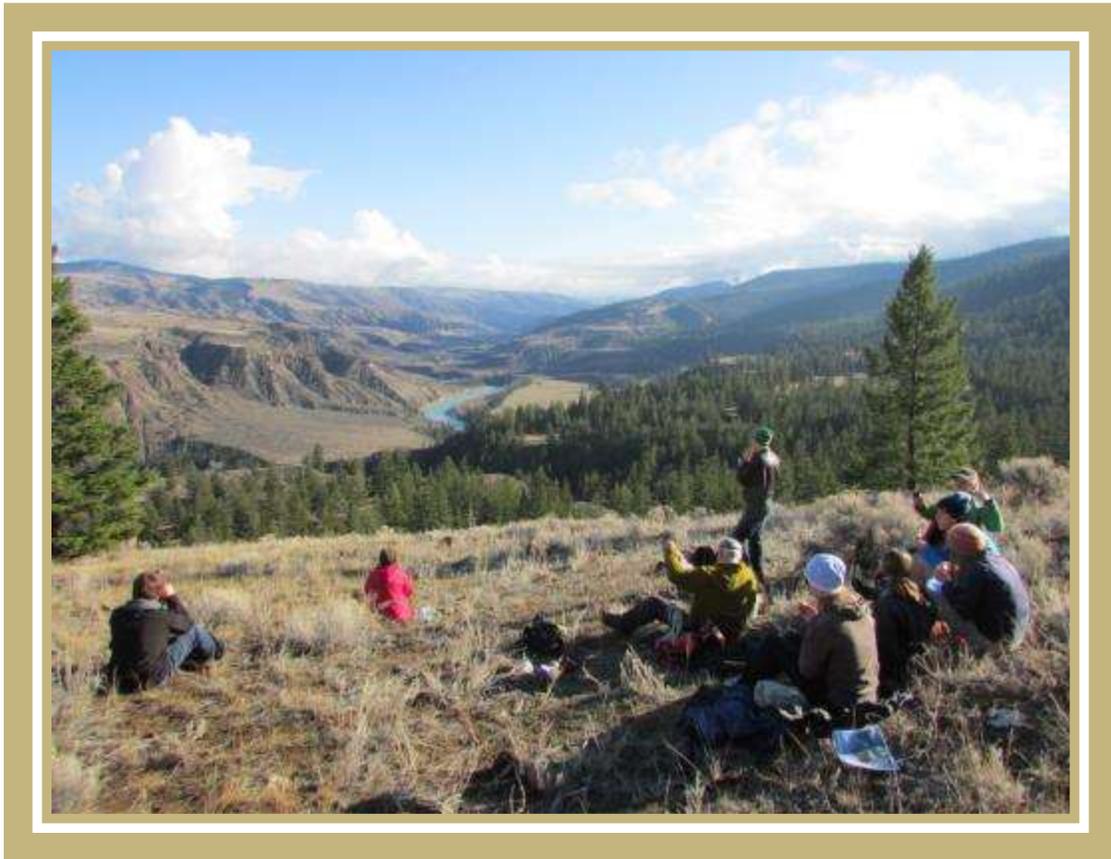
Winter Solstice

The Winter solstice occurs on Tues., Dec. 22nd.

Evening Sky Map – courtesy of Skymaps.com.

For a printable sky chart go to this web site - Skymaps.com/downloads.html - and scroll down the center of the page to the download button. "December 2015: Northern Edition (PDF)". At the end of the month it changes to show the next month's chart.



Member's Moment from Francis McCoubrey**Falcon Enviro Club Taking in the Views at Farwell**

During the Fall Break Paula Laita and I led six students from Williams Lake Secondary, Falcon Enviro Club along with two parents on a hike into the Farewell Canyon area. Thanks to advice from Jim Sims we were able to lead them to two first nation's village sites (Earth Lodges), an exceptionally large ant hill and down a stunning sandy ridge towards the Farewell farm site. Students participated in guiding the group using GPSs that Paula had loaded with important way points. We were also able to see a lone Big Horn Sheep ram across the valley grazing in the sun. Students hope to participate in several more trips throughout the year where they will become more comfortable participating in wilderness trips. Here we share with all of you our special moment looking down the Chilcotin River.

"Member's Moment" is an opportunity for you to share a special scene, plant, animal, bird or outdoor activity that you have enjoyed and photographed here in the Cariboo Chilcotin. A chance for you to encourage other members to get outdoors and find their own special moments close to home and perhaps share them with all of us. For each newsletter the editors will select one or two photos for inclusion in the newsletter based on the quality of the photo as well as the interesting paragraph you must provide. We will save all submitted unused moments in hopes they may find a place in a future edition. Please email your full resolution photo and paragraph to the muskratexpress@shaw.ca. A special thanks to Francis for her winning entry.

Donation Form

I have enclosed a donation of \$30 _____ \$50 _____ \$100 _____ \$200 _____ \$300 _____ other _____

Name _____

email _____

postal address _____

A donation to the Nature Centre in a friend or family member's name makes a great holiday gift! We will send you a beautiful card that you can give to the recipient acknowledging your gift to the Nature Centre in their name.

I am making a donation of _____ as a gift. Please send me a card that I can give to the recipient.

Please make your cheque payable to Scout Island Nature Centre Fund and mail it to

Scout Island Nature Centre
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Williams Lake BC V2G 5K5